

United Kingdom

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The topic of immigration was a central theme in the United Kingdom (UK) throughout the year, with the Conservative Party, led by Prime Minister David Cameron, promising to adopt more stringent regulations. The Euroskeptic, populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), campaigning on an anti-immigration platform, won the European Parliament elections in May and gained its first seat in the House of Commons through an October by-election. Movements in support of Britain's exit from the European Union (EU) and withdrawal from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) continued to create friction between the UK and other EU member states.

Revelations of widespread privacy violations by the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) continued in 2014 after the leaking of files detailing the interception of millions of Yahoo! webcam images and the development of tools to manipulate online polls and track social network users.

In a referendum in September 2014, the Scottish people voted to remain part of the UK.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 40 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

Each of the members of the House of Commons, the dominant, lower chamber of the bicameral Parliament, is elected in a single-member district. Parliamentary elections must be held at least every five years. Executive power rests with the prime minister and cabinet, who must have the support of the Commons.

The House of Lords, Parliament's upper chamber, can delay legislation initiated in the Commons. The Commons must reconsider any measure defeated by the Lords, but it can ultimately overrule the upper chamber. The Lords' approximately 800 members consist mostly of "life peers" nominated by successive governments. There are also 92 hereditary peers (nobles) and 26 bishops and archbishops of the Church of England. The monarch, currently Queen Elizabeth II, plays a largely ceremonial role as head of state.

In the 2010 parliamentary elections, the Conservatives led with 306 seats. Labour placed second with 258, the Liberal Democrats took 57, and smaller parties divided the remainder. Prime Minister Cameron, lacking a majority, formed a rare coalition government with the Liberal Democrats.

The populist UKIP finished first in European Parliament elections in May 2014. With voter turnout of only 34.2 percent, the party received 27.5 percent, while Labour came second with 25.4 percent and the Conservative Party finished third with 23.9 percent. UKIP also gained its first member of Parliament (MP) in the House of Commons in an October by-

election after former Conservative MP Douglas Carswell defected to UKIP and won his seat under his new party affiliation.

Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) consolidated their control in 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly elections. The ruling Scottish National Party (SNP) made major gains in Scotland's election the same year.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 16 / 16

The Conservative and Labour Parties have traditionally dominated UK politics, with the Liberal Democrats in third place. UKIP's 2014 success brought immigration and the economy to the forefront of political issues. This was the first time since 1906 that any political party other than the Conservatives or Labour has won in national-level elections.

Other parties include the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru and the SNP. In Northern Ireland, the main Catholic and republican parties are Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Parties, while the leading Protestant and unionist parties are the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP. Smaller parties, such as the Greens and the British National Party, fare better in races for the European Parliament, which feature proportional representation voting.

The struggle between unionists and Irish nationalists over governance in Northern Ireland largely ended with a 1998 peace agreement, which established the Northern Ireland Assembly. The formal disarmament of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—an outlawed Irish nationalist militant group—paved the way for the first assembly elections in 2007. A 2011 referendum increased the Welsh Assembly's autonomy, giving it authority to make laws in 20 subject areas without consulting Parliament.

After much debate between the UK and Scottish Parliaments over the terms of a referendum on Scotland's independence, Cameron and then-Scottish first minister Alex Salmond agreed to schedule a vote for September 18, 2014. Despite a number of polls showing the independence vote gaining ground, Scotland voted to stay in the union. Turnout was 84.6 percent, with 55.3 percent voting "No" to independence and 44.7 percent voting "Yes." Given the level of support for independence, Cameron tasked a cross-party commission with working out details of devolution of powers to Scotland. The commission proposed further devolution for the Scottish parliament in its November report, including setting income taxes and increased borrowing powers.

C. Functioning of Government: 12 / 12

In 2013, Cameron announced that he would renegotiate Britain's membership in the EU and hold a referendum on leaving if Conservatives won the next elections. Business lobby groups and investors were disturbed by the news of a possible British exit.

Corruption is not pervasive in Britain, but high-profile scandals have damaged political reputations under both Labour and Conservative governments. The Bribery Act, which is considered one of the most sweeping pieces of antibribery legislation in the world, came into force following a 2011 scandal in which the *News of the World* paper admitted to having repeatedly bribed public officials.

Political party funding has been a controversial topic, and scandals around donations occur. Political parties are funded through membership fees, donations, and state funding (if they are in opposition). Party membership hit a historic low of 1 percent in 2014. In July, Cameron came under fire for accepting a donation of £160,000 (\$250,000) from the wife of a former Russian minister in exchange for a game of tennis with him and London mayor Boris Johnson. A March change in Labour membership rules angered union leaders, the party's majority funders, leading them to cut the number of affiliated members and £1.5 million (\$2.3 million) in union donations.

A 2013 World Bank study concluded that the UK's freedom of information laws are "reasonably successful." Civil liberties groups and the press have criticized government-proposed reforms to limit freedom of information requests. In March 2014, in response to a freedom of information request originally submitted nine years earlier, an appeals court ruled that the public has the right to access letters written by Prince Charles—also known as the "black spider" memos—to several government departments. The UK placed 14 of 175 countries and territories on Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 57 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

Press freedom is legally protected, and the media are lively and competitive. Daily newspapers span the political spectrum, though the economic downturn and rising internet use have driven some smaller papers out of business. On rare occasions, the courts have imposed so-called superinjunctions that forbid the media from reporting on certain information or even the existence of the injunction itself.

The state-owned BBC is editorially independent and competitive with its counterparts in the commercial market. A series of scandals have plagued the broadcaster in recent years, including the convictions of several current and former employees for sexual and verbal abuse in 2013, and a controversy involving senior managers given inordinately high severance payouts and executive pay.

The journalism scandal that led to the 2011 closure of *News of the World*, owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, wound down in July 2014 with the acquittal of the tabloid's former chief executive officer Rebekah Brooks. Brooks, along with seven of the paper's journalists, was accused of hacking the voicemails of hundreds of public figures and crime victims. The paper's former editor, and Cameron's former communications director, Andy Coulson was sentenced to 18 months in prison. Four other journalists pleaded guilty and received reduced sentences.

A regulatory system to prevent future media transgressions was established in 2013 in the wake of the scandal. The new regulations set up a recognition panel, which will assess self-regulatory bodies' compliance with certain criteria, including independence from the industry and the availability of a complaints mechanism. The system will come into force after the panel receives the first application. The British media and numerous press freedom organizations have opposed the changes. The newspaper industry launched a self-regulatory body, the Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO), in September 2014. Critics voiced concerns regarding the organization's independence from the industry, and politicians questioned whether IPSO was different from its discredited predecessor, the Press Complaints Commission. The *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Economist* have refused to sign up. A rival initiative called the Impress Project also began in 2014, claiming that, unlike IPSO, it would seek recognition under the royal charter.

In February the High Court ruled that the controversial detention at Heathrow Airport of the partner of investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald was lawful and proportionate. Greenwald is the *Guardian* columnist responsible for breaking the Edward Snowden story linking the GCHQ to the surveillance program of the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013. In July 2013, two security agents threatened journalists in the *Guardian*'s offices and compelled them to destroy computer hard drives.

Despite the 2013 Defamation Act overhaul of UK libel laws that introduced a "public interest" defense, set more stringent requirements for claimants, and made it more difficult for foreigners to file a complaint, the number of cases has increased, and those involving online statements more than tripled in 2014. In September, a man was sentenced to 18 months in prison for sending threatening messages to a Labour MP on Twitter.

The government does not restrict internet access. However, in July 2014, Parliament passed the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act, which compels telecommunications companies to store user data for up to 12 months and make them available to law enforcement. The far-reaching regulation authorizes the interception of communications outside the UK.

Although the Church of England and the Church of Scotland have official status, freedom of religion is protected in law and practice. A 2006 law bans incitement to religious hatred, with a maximum penalty of seven years in prison. Nevertheless, minority groups, particularly Muslims, report discrimination, harassment, and occasional assaults. The Islamic community has come under threat and occasional violence from the far-right English Defence League. Amid growing concerns over terrorism, Islamic extremists, including the well-known radical preacher Anjem Choudary, were swept up by a police raid in September 2014.

Academic freedom is respected. In June 2014, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) placed 5 of 21 schools in Birmingham, England, on "special measures" to promote secularism. The move followed a police investigation into extremist Islamist infiltration and attempts to promote radicalization and sex segregation in a number of Birmingham schools. School officials had failed to take steps against the religious activities, partly because they feared accusations of Islamophobia.

The debate over civil liberties and privacy protections continued following ongoing leaks detailing GCHQ surveillance practices involving wiretapping of millions of phone calls and more than 200 fiberoptic cables. MPs proposed an amendment to the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) in October 2014, following revelations that the police had used RIPA to obtain data from journalists and circumvent legislation protecting journalistic sources.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are respected. In 2013, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association criticized certain laws and practices used to police demonstrations, including the criminal charge of “aggravated trespass” used occasionally against protesters and the use of “kettling,” a tactic in which a cordon of police contain protesters in a limited area.

Civic and nongovernmental organizations may operate freely. UK law bans groups labeled as terrorist organizations. A lobbying bill adopted in January 2014 was heavily criticized for limiting the amount of money organizations can spend during election years; opponents assert that the bill’s ambiguous language could lead to self-censorship and hinder the work of smaller groups.

Workers have the right to organize trade unions, which have traditionally played a central role in the Labour Party in particular. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in public-sector strikes in July 2014 to protest the 1 percent cap on pay raises that has been in effect since 2010.

F. Rule of Law: 15 / 16

A new Supreme Court began functioning in 2009, transferring final judicial authority from the House of Lords. In 2014, Parliament debated a Criminal Justice and Courts bill that proposes wide-ranging criminal law reforms to modernize the justice system and focus on reducing reoffending.

The police maintain high professional standards, and prisons generally adhere to international guidelines. Despite several ECHR rulings in the past decade that find the UK in violation of prisoners’ rights, the UK has not amended its blanket ban on inmates’ right to vote.

In June 2014, the Court of Appeals ruled that parts of the first terrorism case to be held in secret under the 2013 Justice and Security Act must be made public. The act allows civil courts to hear secret evidence in private in cases related to national security. Its critics posit that the act violates fair trial rights, denies defendants the right to counter evidence against

them in closed material proceedings, and allows ministers, rather than judges, to decide which evidence would be withheld or presented in court.

In the wake of incidents involving British citizens joining the Islamic State militant group in Iraq and Syria, Cameron announced the introduction of new counterterror measures in September 2014, with the aim of tackling radicalization and preventing the return of radicalized individuals to the UK.

The government has been accused of “outsourcing” torture by extraditing terrorism suspects to their home countries, where they could be abused in custody; it has consistently denied complicity in illegal rendition and torture. In August 2014, the human rights organization Reprieve said the government was trying to conceal the UK’s role in the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) interrogation program. After the release of the U.S. Senate report on the program in December, the UK government said redactions in the report were not related to UK involvement in the mistreatment of prisoners.

Violence in Northern Ireland has abated in recent years.

Britain’s large numbers of immigrants and their descendants receive equal treatment under the law, but generally face living standards below the national average. There have also been reports of unwarranted suspicion and rising anti-immigrant sentiment amid recent terrorist attacks and plots.

In a November 2014 speech, Cameron announced plans to significantly curb welfare benefits to immigrants. The adoption of such a proposal would, however, require the amendment of EU rules on freedom of movement and the support of EU members. An immigration bill adopted in May requires landlords to check the immigration status of their tenants and banks to perform background checks before opening an account. It also increases scrutiny on marriages and compels temporary migrants to make a financial contribution to the National Health Service.

Although the number of asylum applications to the UK remained steady in 2014, the backlog in pending cases has seen a dramatic increase. Home Secretary Theresa May ordered a review of internal policies after rights group Stonewall revealed that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) asylum seekers faced “degrading” lines of questioning.

A 2010 equality act consolidated previous antidiscrimination laws for age, disability, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 15 / 16

Citizens enjoy freedom of travel and choice of residence, employment, and institution of higher education. Economic activity is not excessively influenced by the government.

While women receive equal treatment under the law, they remain underrepresented in top positions in politics and business. Women won 143 seats in the House of Commons in the

2010 elections. According to a study released in March 2014, gender discrimination continues to persist in the workplace. Another 2014 report revealed that about 137,000 women living in the UK had been victims of female genital mutilation. Abortion is legal in Great Britain, though heavily restricted in Northern Ireland, where it is allowed only to protect the life or the long-term health of the mother.

Same-sex marriage became legal in July 2013. Religious organizations are permitted to refuse to conduct same-sex marriages.

A Bill on Modern Slavery, introduced in Parliament in June 2014, aims to tackle slavery and human trafficking and ensure the protection of victims. It had not yet passed at year's end.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology